

## Characteristics of Adult Children of Alcoholics

When growing up, children of alcoholics learn several basic family survival tactics: don't talk, don't trust and don't feel. A commonly asked question is, "Can a person ever outgrow the effects of growing up as the child of an alcoholic?" The answer is yes, but it is not easy.

Adults who survived a childhood environment where an alcoholic was in residence may continue to experience problems unless they make some life changes. Adult children of alcoholics need to accept the fact that their parent's alcohol abuse negatively affected not only their childhood, but also their adult years. Many adult children of alcoholics continue to support the "don't talk" rule and deny that there were problems in the homes of their youth. Others might admit that they lived in a chaotic home, but argue that it no longer affects them. This is rarely true. In his book, *A Primer on Adult Children of Alcoholics*, Dr. Timmen L. Cermak lists sixteen characteristics that adult children of alcoholics (ACoAs) frequently display. In brief, these characteristics are:

1. **Fear of losing control.** ACoAs maintain control of their feelings and behavior. In addition, they try to control the feelings and behavior of others. They do not do this to hurt themselves or others, but because they are afraid. They fear their lives will get worse if they lose control and they become uncomfortable and anxious when they cannot control situations, feelings and behaviors.
2. **Fear of feelings.** Since childhood and continuing as adults, ACoAs have buried their feelings (especially anger and sadness). In addition, they've lost the ability to feel or express emotions freely. Eventually they fear all intense feelings, even good ones such as joy and happiness.
3. **Overdeveloped sense of responsibility.** ACoAs are hypersensitive to the needs of others. Their self-esteem comes from how others view them. They have a compulsive need to be perfect.
4. **Guilt feelings.** When ACoAs stand up for themselves instead of giving in to others, they feel guilty. They usually sacrifice their own needs in an effort to be "responsible."
5. **Inability to relax/let go/have fun.** Having fun is stressful for ACoAs, especially when others are watching. The child inside is terrified; exercising all the control it can muster to be good enough just to survive. Under such rigid control, spontaneity suffers.
6. **Harsh, even fierce, self-criticism.** ACoAs have very low self-esteem, regardless how competent they may be in many areas.
7. **Denial.** Whenever ACoAs feel threatened, their tendency toward denial intensifies.
8. **Difficulty with intimate relationships.** To ACoAs, intimacy equates to being out of control. It requires love for self and expressing one's own needs. As a result, ACoAs frequently have difficulty with sexuality. They repeat unsuccessful relationship patterns.
9. **Living life as a victim.** ACoAs may be either aggressive or passive victims. They are often attracted to other "victims" in love, friendship and work relationships.
10. **Compulsive behavior.** ACoAs may work compulsively, eat compulsively, become addicted to a relationship or behave in other compulsive ways. ACoAs may drink compulsively and become alcoholics themselves.
11. **Tendency to confuse love and pity.** Because they don't differentiate between these two emotions, ACoAs often "love" people they can pity and rescue.
12. **Fear of abandonment.** In order not to experience the pain of abandonment, ACoAs will do anything to hold on to a relationship.
13. **Tendency to view issues in terms of black or white.** When they are under stress, the gray areas of life disappear and ACoAs see themselves facing an endless series of either/or alternatives.
14. **Tendency toward physical complaints.** ACoAs suffer higher rates of stress related illnesses (migraine headaches, ulcers, eczema, irritable bowel syndrome, etc.) than the general population.

### 15. Suffering from delayed grief.

Because the alcoholic family does not tolerate intensely uncomfortable feelings (such as sadness and anger), children in such homes rarely, if ever, grieve over their losses. Losses in their adult lives usually cannot be felt without calling up these past feelings. As a result, ACoAs are frequently depressed.

### 16. Tendency to react rather than to

**act.** As children, ACoAs became anxious and hypervigilant. They remain so in their adult lives, constantly scanning the environment for potential catastrophes. Problem solving and stress management techniques are something they consider after the fact if at all.

#### Notes:

(1) If you feel that your life is described by these characteristics, please know that you are not alone. Help is available.

(2) This list of characteristics should be read as descriptions, and not as indictments. Initially, ACoAs may see these characteristics as deficits and liabilities. However, with time and healing, they can become assets. By making changes in their lives, ACoAs can break the cycle of destruction caused by alcoholism (or similar dysfunction) so that their children will not have to experience the same problems and pain.

(3) Many non-ACoAs find that the preceding descriptions also fit them. The traumas of living with emotionally absent or abusive parents manifest themselves in many ways. An alcoholic family is but one form the problem can take.

#### Suggestions for ACOAs:

1. Become involved in Alanon and/or Adult Children of Alcoholics meetings, and in individual therapy. By doing this, you will learn: you are not alone in your pain; and you can learn ways

to move beyond the harm you experienced as a child. (If you are concerned that you cannot afford individual counseling, check with local clergy as many offer counseling services. There are also mental health or treatment providers who offer their services based on income levels.) Your mental health is priceless. You owe it to yourself to seek options for becoming healthy.

2. Develop support systems by making those close to you aware of your decision to seek counseling. (Alanon or ACoA groups and counselors will help to provide such a system of support.) Share your decision with friends and family members who will encourage you. Do not share your decision with people who will question you or belittle your decision.
3. Learn how to ask for help. (If you go to an Alanon or ACoA group, counselors and fellow ACoAs can help you learn this. In time, you will learn whom you can trust with your struggles.)
4. Recognize that you have the right to talk about these issues and you have the right to experience and express emotions.
5. If you have children, learn about child development. Seek out and participate in a parent education course to learn skills for relating to your children.
6. Check with your local public library for books on this topic to help you understand and overcome a chaotic childhood.

Finally, know that as an adult, you have survived a childhood that was affected by alcoholism and now you can thrive. It won't be easy, but it will be worth the effort. As the old truism notes, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Start today. Take that life-changing step!

#### Recommended Sources:

##### Books:

*Adult Children of Alcoholics: Expanded Edition.* By Janet Woititz. (HCI Publishers, 1990.)

*Healthy Parenting: An Empowering Guide for Adult Children.* Edited by Janet Geringer Woititz, Ed.D. (Fireside Books, 1992.)

##### Websites:

<http://www.adultchildren.org>

<http://www.nacoa.org/>

*Children's Program Kit available from NCADI*

<http://store.health.org/catalog/productDetails.aspx?ProductID=17245>

